DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 382 124 HE 028 325

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TITLE Addressing Economic Change through the Three-Year Option.
PUB DATE 20 Nov 94
NOTE 7p.; Speech presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (New Orleans, LA, November 20, 1994).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Acceleration (Education); *Bachelors Degrees; Campuses; College Admission; College Planning; Curriculum; Educational Economics; Higher Education; Paying for College; Policy Formation; Quality of Life; School Policy; Student Costs; Undergraduate Study
IDENTIFIERS Albertus Magnus College CT; *Luther College IA

ABSTRACT

A committee at Luther College (Iowa) was appointed to explore the 3-year option for a bachelors degree with regard to curriculum, finances, admissions, and student life. The committee, composed of administrators and faculty from Luther, examined 3-year programs that operate now or are being discussed at several other colleges. They found that these programs have relatively low participation rates, that similar programs begun in the 1970s are now gone, and that, at many campuses, 3-year options may be primarily public relations tools designed to attract students. In examining curriculum and the 3-year option the committee found there would be no change in requirements or increase in faculty size. In examining finances, the 3-year option was estimated to cost 80.05 percent of the 4-year cost and if the college adopted the program it would have to find ways to cope with the 20 percent loss of income from 3-year students. Impact on admissions was found to depend on the number of participating students. With regard to student life, specific problems were not anticipated though students at a 3-year program at Albertus Magnus College (Connecticut) reported a rushed pace of life, erosion of traditions and sense of community, and perception that the school might be a "degree factory." (Contains 14 references.) (JB)

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# Addressing Economic Change Through the Three–Year Option

Presented at the Speech Communication Association Convention,

New Orleans, November 20, 1994

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HE 028 325

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Alan C. Lerstrom

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Some issues in higher education seem to reappear with a degree of cyclical regularity. An article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (February 10, 1993) reported the rekindled interest in the three year bachelor's degree as the Presidents of Oberlin College and Stanford University were presented as taking a position "that colleges should make it easier for students to graduate in three years and should encourage their students to take a close look at the option" (p. A33). A variety of issues and positions have arisen in the discussion. Economic arguments are reflected in the contention of *Money* magazine (1993) which supported the three-year option by declaring that the savings are "far more than one year's tuition" because students enter the job market earlier. D. Bruce Johnstone, Chancellor of SUNY, who discussed a number of changes which could enhance productivity in learning, claimed that students "can meet our learning goals in less time and at less cost than they currently do under our conventional instructional modes and incentives." Others such as Leavitt (1991 ) challenged the validity of a three-year chemistry degree, and Arthur Levine, Chairman of the Institute for Educational Management at Harvard, insists that colleges must not tie degrees to time served. Levine asked for greater flexibility suggesting that a three-year option may be fine for some students, but for others who must work or who need remedial help a five year option maybe more appropriate.

The three-year option was not discussed in print during the 1980's. However, in the 1970's there was significant interest in the option. Costs and benefits were discussed by Walker (1974) and Stark (1973). Allen (1973) assessed the three-year degree and concluded that it was a part of the American educational tradition. Whitla's proposal for a three-year liberal education at Harvard appeared in 1972, as did articles by Conklin and Bok which addressed the validity of the option.

In September of 1993, H. George Anderson, the President of Luther College, appointed a committee "to explore the three-year option for a baccalaureate degree". The committee consisted of the Associate Dean for Student Life, the Registrar, an Assistant Vice President for Financial Affairs/Comptroller, and two tenured faculty members. While searching for information which could apply to Luther College, the committee reviewed three-year options which currently exist or are being discussed at Bates College, Coe College, the Concordia University system, Hood College, Johns Hopkins University, Oberlin College, Ripon College, Shepard College, Upper Iowa University; and Valparaiso University. In investigating existing three-year programs the committee found that relatively few students participate in them. Specifically the registrar at Ripon noted that few students declared an interest in the program, and that even fewer completed it by choosing to stay for the fourth year. Levine (1993) noted that nearly all of the programs which began in the 1970's "are gone now. There was too little student interest to justify their continuation." It would seem that on many campuses the three-year option is as much an advertising or public relations tool which is designed to attract students as it is a legitimate part of the curriculum.

The Luther College committee investigated the three-year option in terms of its impact on the curriculum, finances, admissions, and student life.

## Curriculum

In the terms of the curriculum and the three-year option issues were addressed which included: 1) reducing the numbers of hours required to complete a degree in three years; and 2) assessing the impact on the curriculum if there were no changes in requirements or the size of the faculty. The most dramatic example in hour reduction in the three-year option was proposed by Shepard College which would allow students to graduate with 102 semester hours. Ripon College has reduced the required hours to 112 but specifies "that all credits must be earned on the Ripon College campus." Transfer credits, off-campus credits, and Advanced Placement credits may not be counted toward the 112 hours. Coe College is an example of an institution which has opted to provide a three-year degree by taking extra courses during each semester, and by attending summer school. The college has not reduced the number of hours in the "Accelerated Program".

The Luther College committee addressed the issue of curricular change by assuming that there would be no change in requirements or an increase in the size of the faculty. The Vice President for Financial Affairs argued that as the number of three-year option students increased faculty would need to accept more students in classes. Based on the 73,680 credit hours generated in 1992-93, if 10% of the current student body were on the three-year plan there would be an increase of 0.8% in the number of credit hours generated each year or an increase of 589 credit hours. If 40% of the students were on the three-year plan, the yearly increase in credit hours would be 13%, an addition of 9578 credit hours. Of course some of the increase could be absorbed through summer school.

## Finances

Levine (1993) argued "eliminating the final year of college would be a financial disaster" for schools which primarily depend on tuition and enrollment for funding. As to the claim that students could save one-fourth of the college expense by finishing in three years the Luther Assistant Vice President for Financial Affairs created a number of models using comprehensive fee figures from 1990-91 through the 1993-94 academic years. The model assumed that the students would enroll for all 128 credits at Luther. The cheapest model was one in which a student would enroll for three academic years with one semester including three additional hours and five semesters with four extra hours. The percentage of the four year cost would be 80.05%

If it becomes the intent of the institution to encourage the three year option then a number of models could be created which would include financial incentives to participate in the program. However, colleges will need to find ways to cope with the 20% loss of income for each of the 3-year option students.

## Admissions

The impact of the three-year option on the admissions office would depend upon the number of students involved. A conversation with the Dean for Enrollment Management indicated that the first responsibility of Admissions is to replace the graduating class. If an additional percentage of students were to graduate after three years finding replacements for them would increase the work of the office. Using Luther as an example, if 10% of the 2,256 full time student body of 1993-94 were involved in a three-year program, approximately 22 additional students would have to be recruited to maintain an enrollment status quo. If 40% were involved an estimated 69 additional students would be needed.

## Student Life

The Associate Dean for Student Life at Luther did not anticipate any specific problems that the three-year option would create. He did discuss some advantages and disadvantages to the three-year option which he summarized in the following:

Pros

- the appeal to "non-involved" students
- more time to prepare for grad school
- could encourage creative 3 + 1 programs: internships, peace corps, etc.
- would force more night and summer classes, thus creating more options for four year students and non trads
- decreased student indebtedness

Cons

- decreased "class of _____" identity
- confusion over student status in housing priorities
- more special requests on housing, plus decreased revenue
- impact on choir, athletics
- decreased participation in campus events, activities
- may inhibit internships, travel programs, etc.
- could confuse all sorts of institutional reporting
- miss one year of "student development"
- could create two distinct Luther graduating groups
- more pressure on immediate employment over long term career/life planning

The positive and negative impact of a three-year program can be found in the experiences of students at Albertus Magnus College, as reported in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* March 30, 1994. One nontraditional student was very positive about the

experience because he wanted "to minimize the expense and the delay of getting a degree." Other students found life to be much faster. They felt that they were preparing for mid-terms from the moment they arrived on campus. Student leaders complained that traditions and the sense of community were being undermined. Other students referred to the institution as a "degree factory". From the faculty perspective things have changed in that somewhat less work is assigned and professors lecture more. However, there are opportunities to supplement income by teaching additional courses.

## Conclusion

After having addressed the issues of curriculum, finance, admissions, and student life, the committee attempted to assess the advantages and disadvantages which would occur if Luther College instituted a three-year option. Most of the committee members were not convinced that the three-year option would provide sufficient benefits to justify implementation that would necessitate significant changes in the existing college programs. However if others on campus decided to adopt the option, then the committee recommended that a section be added to the catalog which would suggest that students can choose to graduate in three-years by using various combinations of post secondary hours, advanced placement courses, overloads and summer school to graduate in three-years. Additional assistance could be provided by assigning someone to serve as an advisor for the three-year students. The college has not implemented a three-year program in any form.

## Endnotes


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